

# Potential Wolf Control Actions in Lolo Zone



The Idaho Department of Fish and Game recognizes animal population control is a sensitive subject for many people. We also understand some people have strong feelings - positive and negative - about Fish and Game's proposals to reduce wolf populations in the Lolo Zone, especially the potential use of helicopters in control actions.

Idaho Fish and Game does not make decisions to use helicopters in control actions lightly.

## Limits on control actions.

Fish and Game's goal is to manage wolves to ensure a self-sustaining wolf population under state management authority. Fish and Game will manage wolves to reduce conflicts with people in populated areas, depredation on domestic animals, and, as is the case in the Lolo Zone, to address situations where wolf predation is having too great an impact on elk or other prey populations.

Fish and Game only authorizes agency control actions where wolves are causing conflicts with people or domestic animals, or are a significant factor in prey populations' decline or vulnerability. This is consistent with the 2002 Wolf Conservation and Management Plan approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Idaho Legislature, and consistent with Fish and Game's policy for managing predators. Fish and Game prefers to manage wolf populations through the use of hunters and trappers and only authorizes agency control actions where harvest has been insufficient to meet management goals.

## Restrictions on helicopter use.

Low-level helicopter flights are risky and expensive. Fish and Game uses helicopters to conduct necessary winter big game surveys, support radio-collaring operations, conduct salmon redd counts, and control actions when other methods are impractical and where helicopter use is a cost-effective method. Federal law prohibits the use of aircraft in sport hunting, but allows aircraft use for control actions.

Potential helicopter use for wolf control this winter in the Lolo Zone would involve a limited geographic area for a short period of time and would not occur inside the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. The Lolo Zone comprises a very small corner of the state – just three percent of Idaho's total land mass. Helicopter operations depend on favorable weather conditions and equipment availability.

## **Reasons for wolf control action and helicopter use in the Lolo Zone.**

Idaho Fish and Game has a study area within the Lolo Zone to collect detailed information on wolves and prey populations in addition to broader-scale information gathered for the entire zone. There are at least 12 packs in the Lolo including five packs that travel back and forth between Idaho and Montana. Fish and Game will continue to collect information to evaluate the effectiveness of control actions in meeting population goals for all big game species.

Lolo elk populations have been in decline for years, dating back to the early 1990s. Fish and Game has conducted extensive research that indicates wolf predation is the leading cause of death of adult cow elk and calves older than six months, while black bear and mountain lion predation is the leading cause of death for younger elk calves.

Although Fish and Game's elk objectives for the Lolo Zone are set below historic population highs to address declines in habitat quality, these objectives aren't being achieved. Fish and Game has been working with federal land managers for several years to improve habitat in the Lolo Zone.

Public hunting of black bears and mountain lions in the Lolo Zone appears to be meeting Fish and Game's objectives for reducing elk calf predation by these species. Public harvest of wolves in the Lolo Zone, however, is well below objectives for reducing wolf predation on elk. As of December 15, 2011, the public had harvested only 7 wolves. Fish and Game's goal is to reduce the wolf population in the Lolo Zone to 20 to 30 wolves in 3 to 5 packs for a period of 5 years to give Lolo elk populations a chance to recover.

Assuming public harvest of wolves remains low in the Lolo Zone, Fish and Game will conduct agency control actions through a combination of trapping and aerial control. These actions are consistent with its predation management plan for the Lolo Zone. Fish and Game's predation management plan is based on research information and data regarding predator and prey populations.

Even while wolves in the Lolo Zone were on the Endangered Species List, there was a process for U.S. Fish and Wildlife to approve reducing local wolf populations to address unacceptable impacts to elk herds. Fish and Game was in the process of obtaining U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approval for wolf reductions in the Lolo Zone through Endangered Species Act rules when wolves were delisted. Scientific experts outside the agency have reviewed the framework for Fish and Game's proposal to reduce the Lolo wolf population and underlying research.

## **Miscellaneous**

Idaho Fish and Game does not have specific details regarding Lolo aerial control actions at this time. Fish and Game will provide information regarding wolf control actions in monthly wolf management updates that will be posted on the Fish and Game website:

<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov>

## Documents

### **IDFG Lolo Predation Management Plan**

<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/public/wildlife/planLoloSelwayPredation.pdf>

### **IDFG Wolf Management (Harvest Information, Monthly Management Reports)**

<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/public/wildlife/wolves/>

USDA Wildlife Services evaluated methods for controlling wolf populations in Idaho under the National Environmental Policy Act. The **USDA Wildlife Services Environmental Assessment is at:** [http://www.aphis.usda.gov/regulations/pdfs/nepa/revised\\_idaho\\_wolf\\_ea.pdf](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/regulations/pdfs/nepa/revised_idaho_wolf_ea.pdf)

US Fish and Wildlife Service was evaluating a version of this proposal made under Endangered Species Act rules at the time wolves were delisted.

<http://www.fws.gov/idaho/graywolves/FinalEA/Lolo10021111.pdf>